

Webster quits as CIA chief

Was focus of criticism

By Owen Ullmann
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WASHINGTON — William H. Webster resigned as director of the Central Intelligence Agency yesterday, ending a four-year tenure marked by widespread criticism of his performance as the nation's chief spymaster.

President Bush said the 67-year-old Webster had decided on his own to retire from government service, but several senior administration officials said the White House had been privately encouraging the CIA director to step down.

Administration officials have criticized Webster for failing to anticipate the collapse of the Soviet empire and, more recently, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

Bush, who made the announcement at a news conference with Webster at his side, said he had not decided on a successor.

Candidates previously mentioned for the job include James R. Lilley, 63, the U.S. ambassador to China and a career intelligence officer with close ties to Bush; Robert M. Gates, 47, Bush's deputy national security adviser and a former acting CIA director; retired Adm. Bobby Ray Inman, 60, former deputy CIA director; retired Army Lt. Gen. William Odom, 58, former director of the National Security Agency, and Robert M. Kimmit, 43, an undersecretary of state.

Webster, who served as a federal judge and FBI director before being named to head the CIA in 1987, was brought to the spy agency by then-President Ronald Reagan to smooth its relations with Congress after the stormy tenure of the late William J. Casey.

Triggered protests

Casey had triggered protests from lawmakers after he was found to have misled them about his and the CIA's role in the Iran-contra scandal.

Gates, who had been Casey's deputy, became acting director when Casey was forced to resign because of a brain tumor that later killed him. Reagan subsequently nominated Gates as a permanent successor, but Gates withdrew because of Senate suspicions that he might have helped Casey mislead Congress.

But Gates, who was never found to have done anything wrong, won an endorsement for the CIA post yesterday from Sen. William S. Cohen (R., Maine), former vice chairman of the Senate intelligence committee.

"I believe that he would be able to be confirmed notwithstanding the questions that were raised at that time," Cohen said. "We were right in the middle of the Iran-contra affair and the emotions were high and I think that he was not given fair or full consideration of the job that he had done."

When Bush became President in 1989, he kept Webster at the CIA but downgraded the post by removing it from the cabinet and stripping it of policy-making responsibilities.

Webster is credited with restoring friendly relations between the CIA and Congress, but his abilities as an intelligence analyst and manager have been under attack for several years from Bush administration officials, members of Congress and senior intelligence officials.

Bush, who served as director of the CIA in 1976, gave no hint of those criticisms yesterday, as he hailed Webster for doing "a superb job."

"I hate to see him go. This was his choice. ... It did come as a surprise when Bill brought this up to me," said the President.

'Things were not right'

Despite Bush's comments, senior administration officials insist Webster's departure was not voluntary.

"There has been a realization for a long time that things were not right out there [CIA headquarters] and this is a view shared throughout the administration, at the White House and on the Hill," said one high-level State Department official, who did not want to be named. "New blood is needed."

Another top administration official, who also asked not to be named, said the White House had "encouraged him to move on to other pursuits."

Webster was notably absent from most of Bush's meetings with top national security advisers throughout the Persian Gulf crisis, and administration officials said three months ago that he likely would be leaving his post soon.

Sen. David L. Boren (D., Okla.), chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, lauded Webster yesterday as "a person of total integrity and devotion to the rule of law" who took over both the FBI and CIA during troubled times and helped "to restore public confidence in them."

At a committee hearing on March 21, however, Boren said the nation's "strategic intelligence — that is, long-term political and military intelligence regarding Iraqi intentions and plans — was inadequate."

Sen. Warren B. Rudman (R., N.H.), a member of the intelligence committee, has said the CIA's intelligence analyses are too often "a diffusion of answers, which answers nothing."

The Washington Post
The New York Times
The Washington Times
The Wall Street Journal
The Christian Science Monitor
New York Daily News
USA Today
The Chicago Tribune
The Philadelphia Inquirer
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Better coordination

The Senate and House intelligence committees are in the midst of a year-long series of closed-door hearings on reorganizing the intelligence community to provide better coordination among the many agencies that collect intelligence.

As head of the CIA, Webster also is supposed to manage 11 other intelligence agencies. They include the National Security Agency, which conducts electronic eavesdropping; the National Reconnaissance Office, which controls spy satellites, and the Defense Intelligence Agency, which oversees military intelligence.

One idea under consideration in Congress is to create the position of an intelligence czar who would work out of the White House and supervise the CIA director.

Before moving to the CIA, Webster served nine years as FBI director, during which he restored public confidence in an agency that had been tarnished by disclosures of political influence and civil liberty abuses.

Webster, a native of Missouri, previously served as a U.S. attorney, a U.S. District Court judge and a federal appeals judge.

Tim Weiner of the Inquirer Washington Bureau contributed to this article.

